

Classics in environmental epidemiology: the Barcelona soy bean outbreak

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Perhaps you've heard about the soybean asthma epidemics in Barcelona and how the causes of the epidemics were identified? It is a story of how epidemiological research may sometimes become a thriller! Move back to the 1980s, Barcelona doing the first steps of democracy and competing for the Olympic Games. We were just a bunch of young epidemiologists designing health information systems. A letter to the Lancet drew attention to a series of asthma outbreaks in the city with a consequent collapse of emergency departments, and suggested a possible relation to air pollution. We had to investigate this, and do it quick! The epidemiological approach and leadership allowed a cooperative research group to progress step-by-step, from the identification and description of epidemics to the demonstration of the causes and their prevention. When you are at the ISEE conference, look towards the port of Barcelona from the Montjuic Mountain. You can see the tall silos where the cause of the epidemics, soybeans, were being unloaded. Perhaps you may even see a ship unloading soybeans. Don't worry, there is no fear of asthma epidemics, these silos have filters that prevent dust contamination of soybeans over the city. That was the result of our research, at that time innovative, nowadays a classic that has also provided the cause to unexplained asthma epidemics in other ports. Or perhaps, simply one more example of epidemiological research leading to effective preventive action!

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